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“What Is Royalty Without a Voice?” The Performance of Power in *The King’s Speech*

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Abstract: The core subject of *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010) is the relation between voice and power. In the first place, we have the speech impediment of the Duke of York (the future George VI) and his subsequent inability to deliver effectual messages to the nation in a particularly dramatic phase in history. This failure highlights, by contrast, the identification of monarchy with voice. The film actually shows how the performative power of speech became crucial after the invention of the wireless. The BBC, as George V stated on his death bed, had turned kings into actors: elocution could either make or unmake them. Yet, these are only some facets of the complex dynamics by which language and power are interrelated in the film. Another important issue is the form of verbal exchange between doctor and patient, which enacts a wavering between two kinds of authority, the one possessed by right (legitimate power) and the one acquired by study and experience (expert power). Emphasis is also placed on standard English as the language traditionally associated with higher education, political supremacy and prestige. The importance given to Received Pronunciation and the contempt shown towards other language variants proves how deeply embedded in language power is. Though amiably, even the ironic remarks on conversational rules made by Elizabeth, the future Queen Mother, finally confirm the status quo, putting things and people back into place on the social scale. This is also, ultimately, the policy of the BBC, the institution that has been invested with the task of preserving, at the same time, British national identity and the purity of the English language.

Keywords: language, voice, power, speech acts, monarchy, broadcasting media, received pronunciation, Australian English, American English, conversational rules

“Fraud! With war looming, you’ve saddled this nation with a voiceless King.” This is the desperate cry of the Duke of York to Lionel Logue at the rehearsal for his coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey. Logue, an Australian speech therapist without either titles or official qualifications, is provokingly sitting in

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Edward the Confessor's chair, on which kings and queens have been crowned since 1296. When rebuked by the soon-to-be king Albert for the affront, he replies that "people have carved their initials into it," thus hinting at the infiltration of mass culture even into the solemnest of theatres. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the director of the performance is no longer the Archbishop of Canterbury who, as he himself resentfully remarks, would have made "his own recommendations" to solve any problem related to the king's speech, but an Australian eccentric and amateurish Shakespearean actor.

The scene is set in 1937. It is a time of political crisis, in which all forms of government are being questioned. With Nazism spreading in one part of Europe and Stalin's regime in the other (the "jackboots," and the "proletarian abyss," in George V's words), not even monarchy can be given for granted. King Edward VIII has just abdicated on account of his intention to marry twice-divorced Wallis Simpson, who, beside other things, is rumored to be having an affair with Hitler's ambassador. The specter of war is looming on the horizon.

In this particularly dramatic phase in history, the Duke of York is perfectly aware of his political role and, at the same time, of his apparent inability to perform that role. His duty to communicate publicly has been so far constantly frustrated. He stammers. Words do not come out of his mouth easily: he has to fight with them. This impediment would have been a minor one in the past, when a king's duty, as George V claims in the film, was only that of "looking respectable in uniform and not fall off his horse," but at the time of broadcasting media, the king's voice is everything. It is not just a matter of being an articulate king, a speaker who performs, as Austin and Searle would say, his speech acts and enacts the illocutionary and perlocutionary power of language – its assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declarative functions – by stating, commanding, promising and conveying emotions.¹ With the emergence of broadcasting media the king's voice has become the very means by which monarchy can publicly be enacted. "This devilish device will change everything if you won't" declares George V; "this family is reduced to those lowest, basest of all creatures... we've become... actors!" In another scene, the comparison goes so far as to identify the responsibility of the king with a form of "indentured servitude." The reference is not only to the moral duty to reign, but also to the acceptance of the histrionic nature of the "job": in order to make a living, a king has to perform in public.²

1 Cf. John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); John Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

2 Paddy Scannell, "Talk, Identity and Performance: *The Tony Blackburn Show*," in *Broadcast Talk*, ed. Paddy Scannell (London: Sage, 1991), 201–226, 203.

As J. B. Thompson highlights in his essay *The Media and Modernity*, since Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 “the royal rituals and public image of the British monarchy began to change [...]. Ceremonies [...] were gradually transformed into pageants of unprecedented splendor, meticulously planned and carefully rehearsed.” The more the actual political power of monarchy decreased, the more its symbolical power was emphasized. Broadcasting media turned these ceremonies into “mediated celebrations of national identity,” in which citizens were “invited vicariously to take part.”³

In fact, at the time in which the king’s voice was becoming the tangible sign of his presence and role, also the voice of the people was acquiring unprecedented momentum. The awareness of this new relationship between politics and public opinion was prophetically articulated in the Speech to the Empire Youth Rally delivered by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1937:

In the next quarter of the century [...] the big problems will be the problems of government. The peoples of the world, disillusioned by the horrors of the war, are all seeking eagerly, earnestly, what they conceive to be the best form of government in which people can find happiness, security and develop their talents to their best. So I say to you, take an interest in government. It sounds dull, but think a minute: you may not wish to enter politics, you may have no opportunity, you may have no attitude, you may have no taste. But governments of whatever kind, tend more and more to influence the life of the individual. And if liberty of the individual is to be preserved, it is vital that the individual should know what is going on; should form his opinion, should give his judgment. For that is the foundation of orderly democratic governments.⁴

The foresight of the importance of this triangle of power formed by government, public opinion and broadcasting media had actually been the main reason behind the institutionalization of the BBC from its early years. John Reith, its first director, already acknowledged the “new and mighty weight” of the medium and claimed that “the control of such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state.”⁵ Since its foundation in 1922, the British Broadcasting Company was conceived not as an unrestricted commercial monopoly but as “a state regulated national service in the public

³ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 12.

⁴ The recording of Bevin’s speech is available at <http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Early-spoken-word-recordings/024M1CL0047621XX-0100V0>, accessed November 21, 2013.

⁵ *The Broadcasting Committee Report [The Sykes Report]* (London: HMSO, 1923). Quoted in *A Social History of British Broadcasting. 1922-1939: Serving the Nation*, eds. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff (Oxford Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 1, 6. Further references in the text, abbreviated as SH.

interest.” As such, it had to promote democracy and social unity, both in domestic and foreign affairs.

When the British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation, in 1927, the motto written on the blue ribbon underlying the coat of arms formulated this institutional mission in clear words: “Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation.” At the centre of the chiasmic slogan, enclosed between the twice-repeated term “Nation” (the first time meaning the United Kingdom and the second time the rest of the world), the verb “shall speak” expressed the essential role played by communication not only in the national, but also in the international context. As a powerful perlocutionary act, broadcast political speech could do “things with words”: it could bring peace. Obviously, as imminent events would show, it could also bring its reverse.

Hence the BBC slogan ultimately identifies national identity with an oral performance: being a nation means being able to say it through the radio. The coat of arms itself visually reinforces this statement. Its complex pattern, almost overcharged with symbols, contains all the traditional elements that epitomize the British nation, although rephrased in the light of technological innovation. The lion, a symbol of British identity, is holding in its right paw a strange lightening (more similar to an electric torchlight) which, in the world of modernity, ought to stand for a signal-transmitting aerial. The two eagles that escort it, from the skies of heraldry have landed onto the hi-tech realm of the wireless, becoming the embodiment of the speed with which messages can be delivered by broadcasting media. Their bugles stand for “proclamation,” once again reminding us of performative utterances.⁶ The lion is standing on a shield decorated with a helmet surrounded by seven stars, all symbols of knighthood and nobility but also, more literally, a stylized version of the ether, the physical channel indispensable for broadcasting. At the centre of the shield, the globe creates a sort of *mise en abîme* of the whole composition: although it resembles the armillaries so frequently seen in the portraits of monarchs, particularly Elizabethan portraits, its parallels and meridians have been turned into a grid of airwaves, the invisible net of frequencies surrounding the wireless world.

Political rhetoric harped on the importance of broadcasting for corporate life: “making the nation as one man” were George V’s words at the opening of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924. However, it became soon manifest that in order to create a national consciousness the wireless had to be a family-oriented medium which addressed the subjects of the reign in their individual domestic

⁶ In fact “to proclaim” is included in Austin’s list of verbs associated with performative utterances. See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 154–155.

lives. As Paddy Scannell notes, in the 1930s “the radio in the living room had become [...] part of the furniture of everyday domestic existence. It was in this context that the broadcasters recognized their audience, not as an aggregated totality” (*SH*, 14). To illustrate the point, he quotes this broadcast from *Radio Times*, dated November 1935:

To come home from work on November evening through the wet confusion of the city, the humid press of bus or tram, the rain-dimmed streets that lead to the lights of your own home; to close the door behind you, with the curtains drawn against the rain, and the fire glowing in the hearth – that is one of the real pleasures of life. And it is when you are settled by your own fireside that you most appreciate the entertainment that broadcasting can bring (*SH*, 374).

The film also portrays this aspect of fruition, the family cozily gathered around the radio set, intently listening to the news or to the king’s Christmas address. It was not just a matter of words: the wireless brought monarchy in the form of pure voice from the king’s home into people’s homes. In the (still) colonial context of Britain, the voice of the sovereign expanding through the airwaves seemed to gauge the immensity of the Empire, to become the embodiment of boundless space: it was power made sound. Once again, symbolic clout replaced political influence. No matter if the economic crisis of the early 1930s (the “great Slump”) was troubling a country – which had not yet recovered from the blows of World War I – with new social problems, the worst being unemployment. No matter if the empire, officially transformed into a Commonwealth of Nations with the signing of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, was increasingly becoming an economic burden. When the wireless was on, families sat or stood in an almost religious attitude. This was particularly the case during ceremonies that celebrated the British monarchy. “Mass Observation’s survey of the Coronation ceremony in 1937,” Scannell writes, “has a fascinated section on how the population listened to the event throughout the day, and the kinds of dilemma it posed. Was it permissible to eat or write or read during a ‘sacred’ broadcast?” (*SH*, 284).

Broadcasters had no direct control on the reception since, unlike in other live forms of art and entertainment such as theatre, it occurred in a different place from the one of production. However, they could control institutional discourse, bending it to the needs of the new medium.⁷ This possibility was ingeniously exploited when the first Christmas message, written by Rudyard Kipling and delivered by George V, was broadcast live in 1932:

⁷ Scannell, “The Relevance of Talk,” in *Broadcast Talk*, ed. Scannell (London: Sage, 1991), 1–15, 3–4.

Through one of the marvels of modern Science, I am enabled, this Christmas Day, to speak to all my peoples throughout the Empire. I take it as a good omen that Wireless should have reached its present perfection at a time when the Empire has been linked in closer union. For it offers us immense possibilities to make that union closer still.

[...] I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all. To men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them; to those cut off from fuller life by blindness, sickness, or infirmity; and to those who are celebrating this day with their children and grand-children. To all – to each – I wish a Happy Christmas. God Bless You!⁸

“Voices out of the air.” The magic of the medium required utter perfection. Early radio was always live. A speech could not be recorded and mended; therefore, it had to be crystal-clear, simple and effective. Hooper’s film puts great emphasis on this aspect. As we read in the directions of the scene set at Wembley Stadium, where the Duke of York is expected to deliver his speech for the closing ceremony of the British Empire Exhibition, the BBC speaker “speaks in flawless pear-shaped tones. There is no higher creature in the vocal world.” Rhythm and pauses between strings of words or sentences are essential to a broadcast speech. The absence of sound can communicate as much as its presence. Yet, it cannot last indefinitely: silence would be identified with absence of the signal or perceived as weird and inappropriate anyway. When the words of the duke do not come, we read in the screenplay, technicians bleakly “stare at dials and listen to the hiss of silence.”

The film is a sort of education to speech. Speech considered primarily as a public event, although also the private dimension of the issue is explored. As Connor points out, we “live in an age of amplification, transmission, of voices that are larger-than-life, that are life itself enlarged.” Yet *The King’s Speech* is also, basically, about a man in search of his voice and of himself. The voice, Connor adds, is “the body’s second life, something between a substance and a force – a fluency that is yet a form.”

What is the voice? The voice is always a dream voice, and we can never speak about the experience of the voice except in the register of fantasy, desire, dream, myth. Even, and perhaps especially when we may speak of the materiality of the voice, we evoke imaginary substance and mythical powers.⁹

The magic of voice and the mythopoeic power of language can overcome even the worst of stutters. This secreted quality of speech is brought to the forefront in the scene in which the duke of York tells a bedtime story to his daughters.

⁸ Steven Connor, “Phonophobia: The Dumb Devil of Stammering.” A talk given as “Giving Out Voice” at the *Giving Voice* conference, University of Aberystwyth, 8.4 (2006): 1. Text available at www.stevenconnor.com/phonophobia, accessed November 22, 2013.

⁹ Connor, “Phonophobia.”

MARGARET ROSE

Now Papa tell a story!

BERTIE

Could I be a penguin instead?

He drops to his knees and waddles. In his tux he looks like a penguin. Margaret Rose giggles, but is undeterred.

MARGARET ROSE

Tell me a penguin story, please.

Called upon to perform, the stammer returns slightly, but the girls listen raptly, ignoring their father's minor impediment, and it fades.

Paradoxically, while Bertie is depicted as a capable storyteller within his family, in a similar context the speech therapist Lionel Logue is caught in the embarrassing situation of being an ineffective one.

Lionel is bursting to tell Myrtle something.

LIONEL

I had a special visitor today.

ANTONY

May I be excused?

MYRTLE

(to Lionel)

Oh yes?

LIONEL

You must stay, bored stupid, listening to your parents' inane conversation. [...]

He and Antony start to leave.

MYRTLE

Take your plates.

LIONEL

Special to the point of someone I can't really talk about.

The boys grab their plates and exit. Lionel looks at Valentine, nose still buried in his text.

LIONEL (CONT'D)

Doctor? Doctor? You can go as well.

VALENTINE

(still studying)

I'm fine.

Lionel clears Valentine's plate. Valentine goes back to his book and scientific oblivion.

MYRTLE

Not too high and mighty I hope?

LIONEL

Aah.

Antony burst back in, model airplane in hand, doing barrel rolls with sound effects, bombing Valentine with a tea towel.

MYRTLE

Not someone who'd... call attention? Why bring it up if you can't talk about it?

But while in private conversation the performance of the stammering duke out-reaches that of the speech expert, in public speaking, particularly in broadcast talk, the situation is reversed. If, as remarked by King George V, the device is “devilish,” so is the impediment. As Connor highlights “for most of its history, stammering has been regarded as the result of some material or physical, rather than spiritual cause. At the same time, stammering has been the repository or occasion for the most extraordinary material fantasies, or phantasmal materialisms.” Only with modern psychoanalysis its causes started to be searched not in the body but in the human psyche.¹⁰

The personality of the Duke of York, as well as the treatments shown in the film, offer a sort of compendium of all the theories about stammering that were available at the time, both traditional and ground-breaking ones. Among the former, we find for instance the connection of stammering with a choleric nature.¹¹ This feature in the duke's character can be deduced from a dialogue in which Sir Blandine-Bentham, the official physician of the royal family, asks him to read a line from a book after inserting five marbles in his mouth. As if this were not enough, the passage opens with the sentence “a wealth of words...,” which makes the situation even more absurd. Predictably, the task turns out to be an excruciating one, and Albert loses his temper, revealing his weakness in front of the doctor and his own wife, Elizabeth.

BERTIE

(explodes)

I nearly swallowed the damned things!

¹⁰ Connor, “Phonophobia,” 1–2.

¹¹ In the seventeenth century, Ross claimed that “hasty and eager natures usually stutter” [Alexander Ross, *Arcana Microcosmi, or, The Hid Secrets of Man's Body Discovered* (London: Tho. Newcomb for John Clark, 1652), 250]; while Browne [Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1643)] and Harvey [William Harvey, *De Generatione* (Padova: Paolo Frambotti, 1666)] concluded that “many stutterers are very choleric men.” Cf. Connor, “Phonophobia,” 3.

Bertie storms out as Elizabeth tries to placate the doctor.

ELIZABETH

Temper, Bertie darling, temper.
Tick, tock, tick, tock.

BERTIE

Insert marbles! He can insert his own
bloody marbles...!

On the contrary, the methods and remedies adopted by Lionel Logue mainly suggest a wide knowledge of twentieth-century theories. Stammering could be cured only by finding in the recesses of the psyche the childhood experiences that had generated it in the first place and, after that, through strategies aimed at removing repressed drives, for instance by focusing on rhythm and verbal patterns or by “construing speaking as a kind of singing.”¹² In fact, in the film stammering is connected to several psychoanalytical interpretations, such as “oral anxieties related to nursing” (Bertie reports not having been fed properly by his nanny, who preferred his brother David to him) or “an anal-sadistic impulse to utter obscenities.”¹³

In a memorable scene, the speech therapist teases the duke into using foul language freely, arriving at the following conclusion: “vulgar but fluent. You don’t stammer when you swear.” Yet, in front of the duke’s hesitation to bring out all his repertoire, he provokingly comments that “a public school prig” could “do better than that.” Eventually, he asks him if he knows “the f-word.” This scene is interesting not only because it focuses on the relationship between sexual repression and language, but also because it connects this relationship with broadcasting media. As pointed out by Peter M. Lewis, bad language has systematically been censored in BBC programs, from the foundation till the present day. Exceptions have sometimes been made for artistic reasons, but by no means for the “f-word.”¹⁴ Seen through contemporary eyes, the film could therefore also hint at the repressive policies applied to the medium by its controllers, who, under the pretext of ensuring high standards and preserving national morals and taste, would actually exert a castrating influence on the audience.

Resuming the discourse on stammering, it is relevant to see how castration anxiety takes us back to the association between voice and power, particularly

¹² Connor, “Phonophobia,” 4.

¹³ Otto Fenichel, “Über die Psychoanalyse als Keim einer zukünftigen dialektisch-materialistischen Psychologie,” in *Zeitschrift für Politische Psychologie und Sexuaökonomie*, 1 (1934): 43–62. English edition: “Psychoanalysis as the Nucleus of a Future Dialectical-Materialistic Psychology,” *American Imago* 24 (1967): 290–311. Quoted in Connor, “Phonophobia,” 3.

¹⁴ See Peter M. Lewis, “Referable Words in Radio Drama,” in *Broadcast Talk*, ed. Scannell (London: Sage, 1991), 21.

to the theory that relates stuttering disorders to a desire for verbal power. Logue seems to foreshadow Peter Glauber's theory according to which "the principal struggle in the mind and body of the stammerer is between the huge investment in 'the magical omnipotence of words' and the need to repress his own desire for verbal power; [...] to speak, or to speak well, means to be potent; to be unable to speak – to be castrated."¹⁵ The emphasis placed on power conceived as the ability to perform is observable throughout the film. Significantly, an analysis of the screenplay shows that "can" and "can't" are the modal verbs that appear more frequently. "Can" (42 occurrences) and its negative form "can't" (26 occurrences) are used to express possibility vs. impediment with reference to the voice, but also to political power. Sometimes they have a moral connotation (for example when talking about the relationship between Wallis Simpson and David)¹⁶ or signal a doubt about appropriate behavior.¹⁷ But the modality principally aims at emphasizing performance.

BERTIE

I don't know! I don't care! I stammer.
And no one can fix it.

LIONEL

Bet you, Bertie, you can read flawlessly,
right here, right now.

BERTIE

I can't possibly read this.

LIONEL

Then you owe me a shilling for not trying.

BERTIE

I will never get that.

LIONEL

Yes you can, come on, come on.

But although the most pervasive one, given the subject of the film, stuttering is just one of the possible ways in which language and power may be interrelated. *The King's Speech* actually explores a wide range of

¹⁵ Peter Glauber, *Stuttering, A Psychoanalytic Understanding* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1982).

¹⁶ When Elizabeth asks Bertie whether he thinks David is serious about marrying Wallis Simpson, Bertie declares "He can't be" and Elizabeth replies: "She can."

¹⁷ When Logue asks Bertie to sing out his childhood problems, which were probably the cause of his stammer, he says "I can't sit here singing!," but Logue promptly reassures him: "You can, with me."

sociolinguistic aspects connected to language use. As Fairclough argues, discourse "is the place where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted. [...] Society and social institutions are structured into different spheres of action, different types of situation, each of which has its associated type of practice."¹⁸

The first form of power to be extensively explored in the film is "expert power," a topic to which Fairclough devotes an ample section in his book. Generally speaking, the relation between doctors and their patients is based on the assumption that the former know about medicine and therefore have authority over the latter, who do not.

[T]he meaning system is sustained by power: by the power of the relevant "experts," medical scientists [...]. An example would be how the conventions for a traditional type of consultation between doctors and patients embody "common-sense" assumptions which treat authority and hierarchy as natural – the doctor knows about medicine and the patient doesn't [...]. A crucial point is that it is possible [...] to find assumptions of this sort embedded in the forms of language that are used. (*LP*, 2)

This presupposition is embedded not only in the register adopted in conversations between doctors and their patients but also in the scripts generally followed during this kind of interaction. These involve both linguistic and extralinguistic elements: "[...] people have scripts for a doctor, and for how a doctor and a patient can be expected to interact" (*LP*, 159).

But what if the patient were the duke of York? The film presents a problematic situation for enacting this kind of script. The expert power of the medical scientist and the legitimate power of the duke are bound to generate a conflict. This is apparent even in the verbal exchange with Sir Blandide-Bentham, a doctor whose expertise had been officially recognized by conferring him knighthood. Sir Blandine-Bentham is described as "an elderly, unctuous, studiously-distinguished physician who simultaneously manages to combine pontificating and obsequiousness." This ambiguity can also be observed in his speech, which is characterized by the coexistence of politeness *formulae* and honorifics with the imperative mode. As the following dialogue highlights, the imperative mode, normally adopted to give orders, strongly contrasts with the obsequious attitude that one has to show in front of a member of the royal family. The duke's reaction is inevitable.

¹⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 36–37. Further references in the text, abbreviated as *LP*.

SIR BLANDINE-BENTHAM

If Your Highness will be so kind as to open his hand... Thank you so very much... Sterilized. Now... if I may take the liberty? ... Insert them into your mouth. [...] Fight against those marbles Your Royal Highness. Enunciate!

As Bertie struggles.

SIR BLANDINE-BENTHAM

(CONT'D)

A little more concentration your Royal Highness.

Bertie spits the marbles out.

Predictably, also Lionel Logue's expert power clashes with the legitimate power of the duke and future king. However, to make the exchange more symmetrical and bring the two forms of authority closer to an ideal balance, Albert's capacity to rule and perform is questioned just as much as the therapist's scientific qualifications and actor skills. Moreover, Logue is very good at separating spheres of action: different contexts of situation¹⁹ require different types of discourse. Here the setting plays a crucial role: at his residence, the duke has total command, but at the therapist's home this hierarchy is overturned. It is for this reason that Logue insists on seeing Albert only "in the safety" of his consultation room. "My castle, my rules" or "my game, my turf, my rules" are Logue's favorite sayings. "In here," he concludes "it's better if we're equals."

The search for equality in the relation between Bertie and Lionel is signaled by the use of vocatives. As John Douthwaite points out, forms of address are universal social principles that mark different, hierarchically structured, levels of politeness, deference, intimacy and solidarity. At the top we have formula such as "your honour" and "sir," then the neutral but still formal "Mr," down to more and more familiar forms of address such as the surname without "Mr," the use of the first name, the use of a knick-name, general forms of colloquial address such as "mate" and finally just "hey."²⁰ As the table below shows, the speech therapist goes so far as to call the Duke of York by the diminutive name used by his family. On one occasion, he even uses "mate," which is almost at the bottom of the hierarchical scale of vocatives.

¹⁹ For the concept of "context of situation" see John Rupert Firth, *Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); Michael A.K. Halliday, *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973); Dell Hymes, *Foundations of Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).

²⁰ John Douthwaite, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language. An Introduction to the Communicative Approach* (Torino: SEI, 1991), 134–137.

VOCATIVES (Douthwaite’s examples)	USE OF VOCATIVES IN <i>THE KING’S SPEECH</i>
Your Honour Sir	Your Royal Highness, then Sir after that.
Mr Smith	Mr Johnson , do come in.
Smith	I thought the appointment was for “ Johnson ”?
Frederick	
Freddie	Everyone natters occasionally, Bertie .
Fred	
Mate	There’s a bob in this, mate ; can go home rich!
Hey	

Yet, the message we get from the film is not that social differences are easily overcome. We have, on the contrary, several examples that dramatically mark the relation of power between the two protagonists. In the dialogue that stages the climax of conflict between Lionel Logue and the soon-to-be king Albert, the latter abuses the former in these terms:

BERTIE

Don’t instruct me on my duties! I’m the brother of a King... the son of a King... we have a history that goes back untold centuries. You’re the disappointing son of a brewer! A jumped-up jackeroo from the outback! You’re nobody. These sessions are over!

By calling Logue “son of a brewer” and “a jumped-up jackeroo from the outback,” the duke brings to the foreground a contrast which is not just based on legitimate power, but is also, more generally, derived from a sense of social and cultural superiority. This aspect is all-pervasive in the power relations built up and highlighted by the film dialogue. Logue is probably of working or lower middle class origins and, which is worse, an Australian, hence a person from a dependent dominion and a subject of the British Empire.²¹ Thus Albert’s insult sets historically and geographically more common ways of abusing people on account of their lack of family background, national culture and prestige.

Interestingly, the conflict between British and Australian culture involves, in the first place, language: the standard vs. the non-standard, Received Pronunciation vs. Australian English. In 1930 the historian W. K. Hancock

21 According to the Oxford Dictionary, “jackaroo” is an informal Australian English term meaning, “a young man working on a sheep or cattle station to gain experience.” Its origin, probably late nineteenth century, could be a blend of “Jack” and “kangaroo.” In fact, the feminine equivalent of “Jackaroo” is “Jillaroo,” a blend of “Jill” and “kangaroo.” Still according to the Oxford Dictionary, the “outback” is “the remote and usually uninhabited inland districts of Australia.” *The Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

criticized the South Australian accent as a combination of “polyhybrid of American, Irish brogue, cockney, county, and broken English.” Though he recognized that it was “pleasant to the ear,” he stressed its being the result of “tongue-laziness,” i.e. an anxiety to “communicate as much as possible by means of the fewest and easiest sounds.”²² “Such laziness in speech,” comments Joy Damousi, “suggested a lack of discipline, a poor standard in communication and a lack of moral standing.”²³ By contrast, maintaining some purity of speech was considered indispensable to develop self-control and power. On the other hand, it should be noted that the campaign towards the purity of British English met the reaction of some Australians, who claimed the legitimacy of their language variant and their unwillingness to conform to the standard. According to Mark Logue and Peter Conradi, at the turn of the nineteenth century there was a sort of “elocution movement,” which showed great interest in language and public speaking. This movement was active not only in Britain but also in the United States and Australia, where it led to a greater awareness of the differences between Australian and British English and to a sort of Australian pride.²⁴ Logue, who, as they remark, “had never quite succeeded in shaking off his Australian accent”²⁵ expresses this pride on several occasions in the film. On this account, the most interesting example is the dialogue between the speech therapist and the director of the dramatic society during an audition in which the former is required to perform king Richard III in Shakespeare’s history play. Logue has just finished acting out the first lines: “Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun of York.”

DIRECTOR

Well, Lionel, I didn’t hear the cries of a deformed creature yearning to be King. Nor did I realize Richard the Third was King of the Colonies.

LIONEL

I know the lines. I’ve played the role before.

DIRECTOR

Sydney?

LIONEL

²² Joy Damousi, “The Australian has a Lazy Way of Talking: Australian Character and Accent: 1920s-1940,” in *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity. Essays on the History of Sound*, ed. Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon (Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 2007). Accessed November 26, 2013, http://epress.anu.edu.au/tal/mobile_devices/ch07.html.

²³ Damousi, “The Australian has a Lazy Way of Talking.”

²⁴ Mark Logue and Peter Conradi, *The King’s Speech: How One Man Saved the British Monarchy* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2010), 17–18.

²⁵ Logue, Conradi, *The King’s Speech*, 6.

Perth.

DIRECTOR

Major theatre town, is it?

LIONEL

Enthusiastic.

A sense of British superiority is also shown in the film towards Americans. The contemptuous attitude held by the members of the royal family in front of Wallis Simpson, for instance, is not only due to the fact that she is a twice-divorced woman, which is in itself morally unsuitable, but to the fact that she is a twice-divorced *American*. In this, the film probably tries to reflect the position held by public opinion at the time. Rose Tremain, Wallis Simpson's biographer and author of *The Darkness of Wallis Simpson*, a short story recently adapted for the stage, remarks in an interview:

When people spat out her name with disgust at London dinner parties, it was in fact as an American that they were deriding her. Had she been British, ran the argument, she would have known how to behave and would have quietly slipped away from Edward's life before he became king. Whereas, as a power-hungry siren from the New World, who understood nothing about the British constitution, she was hell-bent on the insane goal of marrying the King of England and becoming his queen.²⁶

In the film, Wallis Simpson is ironically portrayed in the act of playing the great lady, while her use of the language betrays her being but a *parvenu*. For instance, she defines Balmoral Castle “our little country shack,” an understatement that not even the wittiest of British aristocrats could accept. The “bad” effect she has on the heir to the throne is underlined by the fact that David has started using Americanisms, namely the abbreviation of “second” into “sec,” coupled with the omission of the subject and auxiliary: “Just be a sec, darling!,” he shouts while rushing to the cellar to fetch his future wife her favorite wine.

The power of language in relation to its social function is an issue which is thoroughly explored in the dialogues. The core assumption is, of course, that conversation is the place where British class-consciousness becomes most apparent.

First of all, we have upper-class English. As John Douthwaite highlights, “compared to low socio-economic status groups, members of high status groups use longer sentences and more complex syntax more frequently [...],

²⁶ Rose Tremain, “Wallis Simpson: Just Who Did She Think She Was?,” *The Telegraph*, December 14, 2010.

they exhibit greater diversity of lexis, and tend to use more correct or standard language forms as well as more prestigious language forms such as ‘Received Pronunciation’.”²⁷

An evident feature of “high status” lexis is the hyperbolic use of adjectives and adverbs such as “awful”/“awfully,” “appalling”/“appallingly,” “terrible”/“terribly,” “immense”/“immensely.”²⁸ David, in particular, uses the adverb “terribly” almost in every utterance: Wallis is “terribly clever” and misses him “terribly”; when his brother inquires about the reason of his not having been seen for a long time, he replies that he has been “terribly busy.” While being acknowledged, this “posh” use of the language is constantly ironized upon in the film. At a point Lionel Logue comments on the duke’s asking him for help without being cooperative: “Why’d you show up then? To take polite elocution lessons so you can chit-chat at posh tea parties?,” which provokes the duke’s anger and the retaliatory insults about Logue’s being a social non-entity.

References to class-related uses of the English language are also given, more unexpectedly and self-referentially at the highest degree, through the charming character of Albert’s wife Elizabeth, the future Queen Mother. She is perfectly aware of social roles and of the appropriate ways of communicating according to power relations. She cannot pretend to be Mrs. Johnson for long: her social superiority, the result not only of birth but of her aristocratic education,²⁹ comes out almost instinctively. Of course the informal register used by Logue appears to her as unsuitable for a member of the royal family, and a lady. Although she is evidently fascinated by his personality and intelligence, she cannot contain her abhorrence towards the colloquialisms he uses in conversation:

LIONEL

Well have your hubby pop by... Tuesday would be good... to give his personal history and I’ll make a frank appraisal.

ELIZABETH

I do *not* have a “*hubby*.” We don’t ‘pop’. We *never* talk about our private lives. You must come to us. [...]

LIONEL

I thought the appointment was for “Johnson”? Forgive me, your Royal...?

²⁷ Douthwaite, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, 125–126.

²⁸ Alan S. C. Ross, “Linguistic Class-Indicators in Present-Day English,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 55 (1954): 113–149.

²⁹ On this subject, see Bernstein’s theory of “elaborated code” vs. “restricted code”: Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control* (London: Routledge, 1971).

ELIZABETH

Highness.

LIONEL

Your Royal Highness....

She is also piqued by the fact that Logue offers his hand first, and hence takes it “a little gingerly.” A conversation analysis of *The King’s Speech* would actually underscore the important role played not only by linguistic features but also by paralinguistic ones.³⁰ This aspect is, at the same time, stressed by the multimodal discourse of the film (images, sound, performance) and overtly thematized in the dialogues. Conforming to behavioral norms codified by culture is not only a matter of using the appropriate expressions, but of mastering a complex code involving turn-taking rules (“I was [...] told, speaking with a Royal, one waits for the Royal to choose the topic”) kinesics and proxemics (“I was told not too sit too close”).³¹ Haptics (touch) is given particular relevance in several scenes. Besides Logue’s untimely offering of his hand to Elizabeth, emphasis is placed on the gesture that triggers the duke’s angry response in the conflict scene with Logue: “a pat of comfort on the shoulder.” This casual gesture makes Bertie pull back “in offended shock,” shouting to the speech therapist that he should not “take liberties!”

Also Elizabeth uses “posh” language: “You’re awfully sure of yourself,” she says to Lionel Logue when he self-assuredly states that he can cure her husband. And, after being shown Logue’s dining room, she exclaims that it is “Lovely. Absolutely lovely.” On the other hand, Elizabeth possesses a subtle sense of humor aimed at distancing communicative processes while confirming their social dynamics. “Dr. McCleod warned me your antipodean methods were ‘unorthodox and controversial,’” she says to Logue during their first meeting, adding: “I warned her... they were not my favourite words...” She constantly plays with language, even with the clichés of an upper-class register, interspersing her discourse with ironic understatements. For instance, when turning up in Logue’s studio several months after her husband and Logue had separated on unfriendly terms, she states: “I’m afraid we’re slightly late.” To which Logue, having learnt his lesson on politeness, offers the queen a cup of tea using the correct formula: “Would you like some tea, Ma’am?” After all, if this film shows an education to speech, then the process must involve all the characters, including the speech therapist himself.

³⁰ For a recent survey on the subject of conversation analysis, see John Heritage and Steven E. Clayman, *Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities and Institutions* (Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³¹ Both sentences are uttered by Logue during his first meeting with the Duke of York.

Finally, Elizabeth's self-conscious use of language appears in her way of dealing with the most evident feature of high-status discourse: Received Pronunciation. Her awareness, as well as her ironic attitude towards RP, are perfectly illustrated by this dialogue with Logue's wife Myrtle who, without prior notice, finds King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in her lower middle-class living room.

Myrtle has entered, she is flabbergasted.

MYRTLE

Your... your...

ELIZABETH

It's "Your Majesty," the first time. After that, "Ma'am," as in ham, not Ma'm as in palm. [...] I'm informed your husband calls my husband Bertie and my husband calls your husband Lionel. I trust you won't call me Liz.

MYRTLE

Your Majesty, you may call me Mrs. Logue, Ma'am.

ELIZABETH

Very nice to meet you, Mrs. Logue.

When Mrs. Logue invites "their majesties" to dinner, Elizabeth gently refuses, making it apparent that she is lying for the sake of social decorum: "We would love to, such a treat, but alas... a previous engagement. What a pity." Rules are rules, whatever you may think of them and however amiably you can deal with the lower in status.

As sociologists Littlejohn and Foss concluded while commenting on Bernstein's seminal work,³² "people learn their place in the world by virtue of the language codes they employ."³³ This final dialogue lays bare most of the issues related to language and power presented in *The King's Speech*. The reference to Received Pronunciation, in particular, puts together, once again, monarchy, relations among classes, and broadcasting media. In fact, "the language most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose menfolk have been educated at the great boarding schools,"³⁴ was not only the King's English, but also the English of the upper classes and of the BBC. Beside the aesthetic and political motivations, the connection was obvious: both British monarchy and the broadcasting system were entitled to and responsible for preserving the standard, in language as well as in power

³² Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*.

³³ Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002), 178.

³⁴ Daniel Jones, *An English Pronouncing Dictionary* (London: Dent, 1917), iv.

relations, in the international and in the domestic context alike. Although kings and queens could enter their subjects' homes as “voices in the air” and, at least in this film, even physically, the relationship was destined to remain metaphorical and ideal.

The news reports on the first public speech held by George VI after Logue's therapy emphatically underlined the fact that the king was actually speaking the quintessential King's English. The *Daily Telegraph* wrote that the speech “was slow, deliberate, and clear” and that the voice “betrayed no sign of fatigue.” Also the *Daily Mail* praised “the sound of the King's voice and the purity of his diction.”

With all the depth of his father's voice, there is an additional softness which makes it even more impressive for the listener. I think it was the nearest approach to perfect ‘standard English’ I have ever heard. There was no trace of anything which could be called accent.³⁵

The king had finally found the right to be heard, his voice and himself. “Because I have a right to be heard, I have a voice!” is George VI's final, liberating cry in *The King's Speech*. Ironically, the original recording of the ceremony of the coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth on May 12, 1937 is, at least in the first part, a silent one. Without the radio commentary, the effect is rather disquieting: the staggering procession, the ostension of all the symbols of monarchy, the robes and scepters seem to highlight, by contrast, how royalty without a voice may appear as a dumb pageant, as a senseless pantomime of power. The effect reminds us of Erving Goffman's social theory, aptly cited by Scannell:

(1) If human beings are sacred objects, they can be desecrated, the territories of the self invaded and in ‘total institutions’ stripped away and destroyed [...]. The self is, from moment to moment, perishable, dependent on others who, since their self-projections are vulnerable too, have a common interest in collaborating to sustain the general character of the performance in most mundane social settings.³⁶

But just when we start feeling overwhelmed by the hollowness of the whole ritual, we hear the voice of a BBC speaker over the flickering, time-bedimmed images of Westminster Abbey. With ineffable poise, the voice describes every gesture and movement, names every person and object on the scene. Music in the background adds pathos to the description. Then, suddenly, the performance starts making sense.

35 Quoted in Logue and Conradi, *The King's Speech*, 131.

36 Scannell, “Talk, Identity and Performance,” in *Broadcast Talk*, ed. Scannell, 201.

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